

Old Wives' Tales closes, building sold to apartment developer; owner says progressive restaurant 'outlived usefulness' (Q&A)



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Melissa Binder | The Oregonian/OregonLive

Old Wives' Tales closed May 4.

(Melissa Binder/The Oregonian)

Old Wives' Tales on East Burnside Street closed Sunday after 34 years in business.

The 4,455-square-foot restaurant, which was founded as a eatery and women's center, was known for being kid-friendly and serving vegetarian and gluten-free options. The area surrounding the restaurant, located at 1300 E. Burnside St., has changed dramatically in recent years. High-end apartments opened across Southeast 13th Avenue last year.

We talked with owner Holly Hart about the landmark restaurant's history and what's next for the site. Hart's responses have been edited for clarity and brevity.

Why did you open Old Wives' Tales?

I come from a very strong community activist background. I opened it because of an extension of my activism. I was interested in supporting community groups.

There were feminist restaurants in different major cities in the United States, and I felt Portland needed one. Up until that time, the only gathering spaces for gays and lesbians were bars. They were alcohol based. As someone who doesn't drink, I wanted to provide an alternative to that.

We made meeting space available over the years. We never charged for a room, and depending on the group we would sometimes provide refreshments. Rather than charge people to use the space, you make money from food sales.

The restaurant was known for serving a lot of vegetarian and gluten-free options. How did that fit into your vision for Old Wives' Tales?

Because I wasn't coming from a typical restaurant background, I didn't have any preconceived notions about what should or shouldn't be in things. Thirty-four years ago nobody talked about gluten. Some people came in and said they couldn't eat wheat. Others couldn't eat dairy or soy. Onions didn't sit well with some people. I just listened to my customers. We listed the ingredients in all of our dishes so people would know exactly what they were eating.

We also served multi-ethnic foods right from the beginning because that is the kind of food that interested me. We were doing fusion food before it was called fusion food.

You said you don't come from a "typical restaurant background." What is your background?

I'm originally from Chicago, and I came out here to attend Reed in 1964. I studied international studies at Reed College. I went to law school at Berkeley after Reed, because that is something that activists did. I came back to Portland in 1975 and practiced law for about four years, then opened the restaurant in 1980.

What is in store for the building?

The building has been sold to a developer who has built several apartment buildings in the area.

(She declined to identify the developer, and no sale appears in public records yet.)

Why did you decide to close Old Wives' Tales?

A lot of different things converged. I'm 67 years old, and I'm not physically able anymore. We were no longer the only kid on the block -- other people started serving the range of food we did. We lost a whole square block of free parking when a new apartment went up.

The ideas that started the business have succeeded. People can go wherever they want. We've outlived our usefulness, and that's awesome. Social growth has gone just the way I would have dreamed.

How do you feel looking back at 34 years in business?

I accomplished what I set out to do, which was to meet unmet needs, which turned out not to be just social. I feel like I started a good thing and carried it through the years and ended up in a good place.

What's next for you?

I have no idea. But I'm ecstatic. People have told me they'd like to have the recipes, and I'm thinking I will do that. Maybe not a full cookbook, but at least a collection of recipes.

I thought about moving the restaurant somewhere else, but I'm kind of too old to start all over again. If somebody wants to contact me and wants to keep my recipes and the Old Wives' Tales trade name I'm open to talking.

What do you remember about Old Wives' Tales? Share your experiences and memories in the comments.

-- Melissa Binder